

Stanford Taylor's remarks as prepared for delivery at Wisconsin State Education Convention

Jan. 22, 2020 – Wisconsin Center, Milwaukee

By State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor

Thank you, President Zahrte, for the introduction, and for your remarkable service to the students and educators of the Tomah community. Thank you to John Ashley and WASB, Jon Bales and WASDA, and Mike Barry and WASBO for your hard work, and for organizing another fantastic state convention.

It's great to be here today at the 99th state education convention; there is so much value in the opportunity to come together to share ideas and learn from each other. This convention is an opportunity for both reflection and inspiration.

This past weekend, I have had the opportunity to attend a couple of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. celebrations. This caused me to reflect on how far we have come, and how far we still have to go. I thought about my first school experiences in a segregated school in one of the poorest communities in the country, Marks, Mississippi. I lived school integration and the civil rights movement.

I was able to access higher education and become a teacher, principal, and ultimately state superintendent. Not of my own accord, but because of a supportive family and community that believed in and advocated for me. I am, as we all are, beneficiaries of the life and legacy of Dr. King and others who worked for social justice.

I am often reminded of the need to balance remarks regarding our persistent achievement, access and opportunity gaps. I call attention to challenges because, if we don't acknowledge them, we don't address them. Please hear me clearly though, I am not in any way diminishing the ability of our learners.

In Wisconsin, our schools and students have so much to be proud of.

- On state report cards issued for the 2018-19 school year, overall 87 percent of rated schools met or exceeded expectations, as did 96 percent of the state's 421 public school districts.
- Participation in advanced placement increased by 1,055 graduates in Wisconsin from 2017 to 2018. The number of exams they took went up by 4,578.
- Students in 2018 graduated at higher rates. The overall graduation rate jumped a point from the 2016-17 school year to 89.6 percent.

We as the adult leaders, however, are grappling with some hard facts.

- Our Youth Risk Behavior Survey data tells us that 40 percent of our students are indicating high levels of anxiety, 28 percent depression, 17 percent self-harm, and 16 percent thought about suicide.
- One in four districts have student populations that are more than 50 percent economically disadvantaged.
- We have over 18,000 homeless students.
- We have deep and persistent achievement gaps and our scores for all students, especially in the area of reading, are not where we want them to be.

I have a year and a half left on my term. I will not be serving it quietly. Our equity mission is to ensure every student has what they need to learn when they need it in order to be successful.

As board members and administrators, your role is so very critical in this work. I travel the state and see the inspiring work you are doing to create these systems and supports for young people as they chart their path forward. There is more work we can and need to do to improve these systems, whether we are talking career pathways for students or regional supports for school safety, like the WISH Center.

I'd like to take this moment, while we are all assembled together, to talk about our five priority areas moving forward. They are:

1. Effective instruction: Each student is taught by teachers using materials and practices that are high-quality, evidenced-based, and culturally responsive;
2. School and instructional leadership: Each student's needs are met in schools led by high quality effective educators;
3. Family and community engagement: Each student attends a school that authentically engages with families, communities and libraries;
4. Safe and supported students: Each student learns in an environment that promotes social, emotional and physical well-being and removes barriers to learning; and
5. Meaningful relationships with students: Each students has a meaningful connection with at least one caring adult in their school.

I truly believe the changes we are making within our systems today will move us closer toward realizing these goals for each and every student that attends school in Wisconsin.

While I am proud of the budget Governor Tony Evers signed last year, we now need to do the hard work of building on that budget. We must continue to communicate what we need to meet the needs of all of our students.

In our meetings and conversations I heard you express loud and clear the need to have resources that are usable and sustainable. I will be focusing on special education, early childhood education, mental health, and opportunities for additional learning time, such as afterschool programs. I will continue to advocate for an increase of at least 60 percent reimbursement rate for special education costs. Supporting special education will allow us to better serve all students.

I am also deeply concerned about the unmet behavioral and mental health needs of our students. You see this every day. We need more school social workers, psychologists, nurses, and counselors in our schools to help our young people choose appropriate responses to their stressors.

We know that early childhood education matters. Studies show the early years of a child's life is when education has the most significant impact on their future development.

We have successes. Twenty years ago, in the 1999-2000 school year, there were only 115 districts with four-year old kindergarten. Now, almost every school district has a program.

I'm happy to say that as a result of work we did with the Department of Children and Families, the state was awarded \$10 million to strengthen the state's early childhood system. Building on this success will be a necessary part of our strategy to close the achievement gap.

We have workforce needs. The role of teachers has never been more important, and the expectations have never been higher. Each of us has a teacher that made all the difference at a critical moment in life. They are the foundation in our system.

I'm worried, however, about the difficulty in attracting and keeping teachers. We have been working with the University of Wisconsin System on a task force focused on this problem, we have been supporting school districts grow your own programs, and educator rising student groups. We have revised our licensing system to respond to the needs we heard, and are examining additional steps we can take.

Our outcomes, especially in reading, are not where we want them to be. We have spent a significant amount of time analyzing the reading data, looking at the research on reading, and examining the instructional materials being used and the alignment with state standards.

We are making changes. We believe, it is important that the role of explicit and systemic phonics is present in the teaching of foundational reading skills. These changes will be reflected over the coming months in the supports and best practices we provide.

As locally-elected school board members, your leadership is key, and the appreciation and support you show to educators is needed. This is exemplified by the teachers of the year who are being honored today. I am asking you to also think about work we can do together to provide additional solutions and supports.

Each of us has a role to play in ensuring every child has the supports they need to graduate college, career, and life ready.

In closing, I encourage you to continue telling us your ideas on how we can make improvements. Continue speaking up, speaking out, and communicating the incredible accomplishments of our students and schools.

As is said, the next year and a half will be busy. There is so much more to achieve.

Thank you for your leadership. Thank you for all you do to improve the lives of Wisconsin students each and every day. Enjoy the rest of the convention and be inspired.

###

Carolyn Stanford Taylor is Wisconsin's state superintendent of public instruction. A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/news/contacts-resources>. This speech is available on the DPI website at dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2020/stanford-taylor-s-remarks-prepared-delivery-wisconsin-state-education-convention.